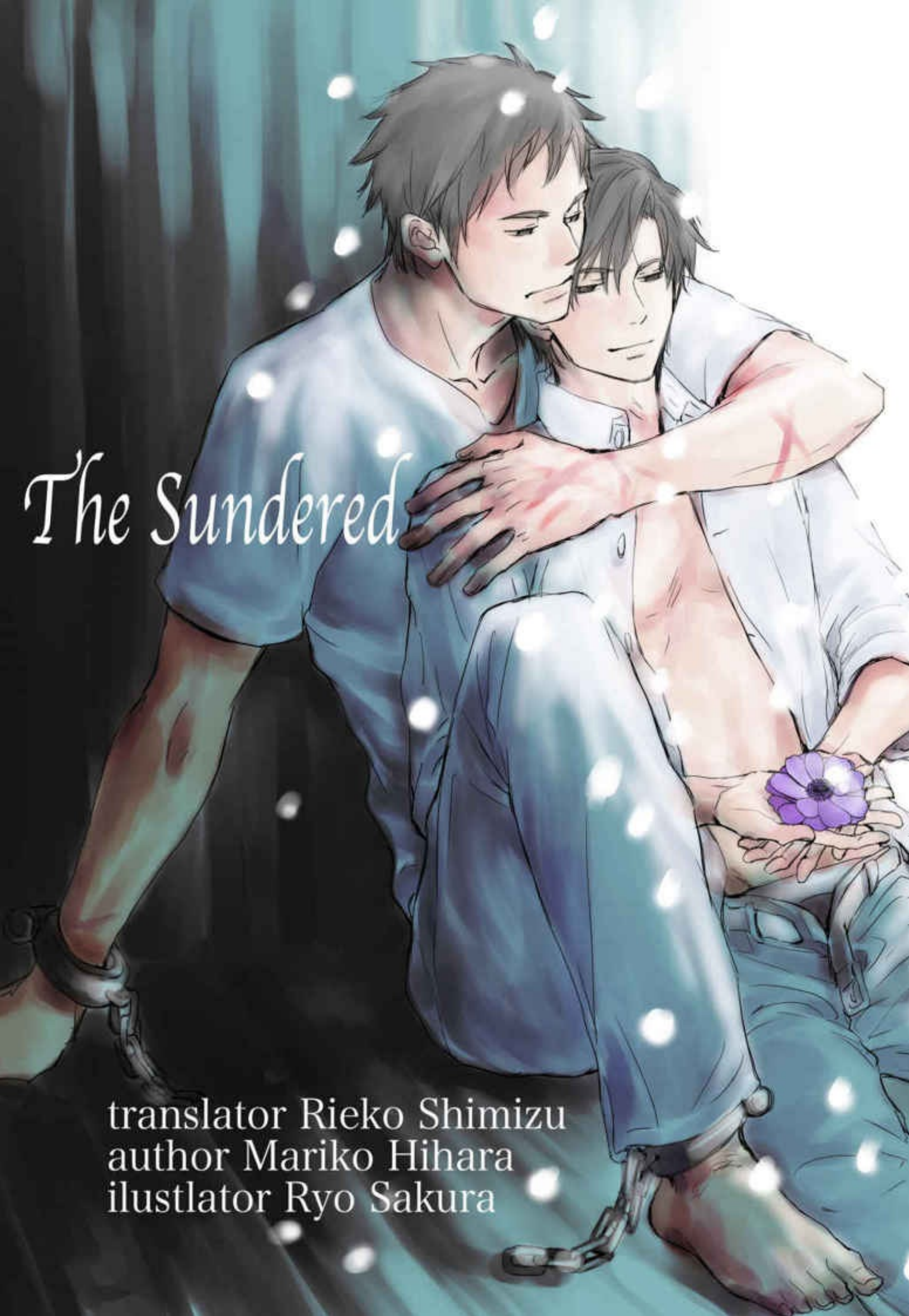


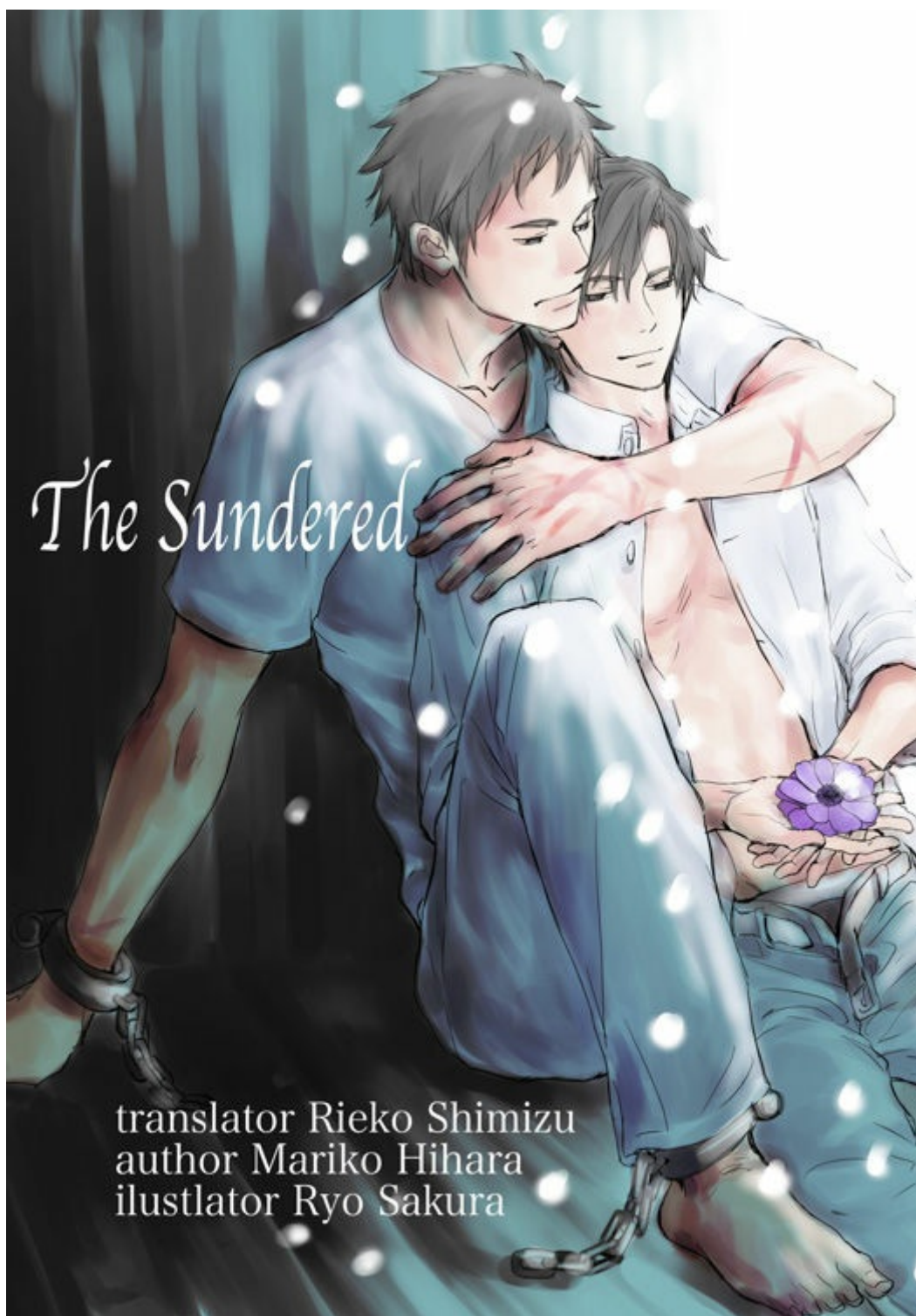


The Sundered

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Chapter 1

Looking out from the hall on the top floor of the high-rise hotel, one could see the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office glowing like a candle in the fading evening light. Although it wasn't the best view, there was never a shortage of people who complimented its beauty with breathless awe.

For Yu Kisaragi, who had grown weary of the sight, it was meaningless.

Kisaragi crossed the hall, with its faint strains of Vivaldi playing, before entering the clinic.

The clinic, located on the twenty-fifth floor of Shinjuku Crest Hotel, specialized in comprehensive physical examinations. It was a satellite clinic of T. Medical School next to the hotel, and had been established to provide services to the ultra-VIPs. Patients reserved a room at the hotel and stayed there while they underwent a variety of examinations at the clinic. Doctors came around to do calls through the specialized underground passage connected to T. Medical School. Patients included politicians, entrepreneurs, and those in the entertainment business-people who wouldn't put a limit on their budget if it meant protecting their privacy.

Kisaragi was a doctor who specialized in gastrointestinal medicine, and doubled as the director of this satellite clinic. He had been hand-picked for the role by his professor, who credited him for his mild personality, refined looks, and clinical prowess.

Kisaragi slipped past the clinic reception desk toward the director's office. Once he was seated at his desk, he began to read through the medical records of

the patients who had appointments for the day.

“Mr. Arima is here,” announced the intercom at his desk. Kisaragi headed toward Consultation Room No. 1. Despite its name, the room was outfitted more like a deluxe hotel suite. One could probably never tell it was a consultation room, save for the X-ray light box and electrocardiograph next to the consultation desk. A well-built man in Japanese traditional clothing was seated in an armchair in the middle of the room.

Soukichi Arima. He was the chairman of Arima Group, one of the largest conglomerate companies around. He also happened to be a so-called “fixer” in the political realm. He amassed enormous assets from special procurements throughout the turmoil following World War II as well as the Korean War, making full use of his strong connections with political parties and power to take control of the political realm. Kisaragi, like many others, also knew about him. Although the man was well past seventy, his skin was still healthy and taut. Although what he had left of his greying hair was thinning, his big, bulging eyes were clear. Rumour had it that he had three mistresses under his wing. Apparently his libido was even stronger than his lust for money and fame.

But none of that mean anything to Kisaragi. To him, Arima was just another patient.

“It’s time for your full checkup already, Mr. Arima. One year seems to fly by, doesn’t it?” Kisaragi said quietly, brushing his chestnut hair up and flipping the examination sheet. He seated himself in the chair in front of the man and compared the screening results from the surgery department to the previous values.

“Your serum amylase is within the normal range as well. The doctor from the surgical department tells me you don’t have any problems. How far

would you like to go with exams this year?”

Arima had undergone surgery for pancreatic cancer two years prior. Kisaragi had happened to be in charge of his abdominal ultrasound examination at the time, and he had found a small shadow in the pancreatic body. Once it was found to be pancreatic cancer in its early stages, Arima had undergone surgery for its removal.

Arima made a relaxed, sweeping motion with his large palm.

“Actually, doc, I’m not here for a physical. I’d like to be admitted your internal medicine department for a while for medical examinations. Starting tomorrow.”

“I can’t arrange for that on such short notice?”

Unless it was for an emergency, the wait list to be admitted to T. Medical School’s internal medicine department was at least one month long. Arima once again waved his hand languidly.

“I wouldn’t mind being put into a special room. Anywhere is fine.”

“A special room, you say.” Kisaragi wasted no time in turning to the computer at his desk to contact the person in charge of reservations.

“There’s a room available that’s 350,000* after insurance deductions.”

“Does it have its own elevator?” When Kisaragi said yes, Arima nodded and said he would take the room.

“A royal suite here would cost seven, eight hundred thousand. This is nothing compared to that.” Arima glanced over at the door and yelled, “Hey!”

A secretary hurried into the room.

“I’m being admitted. Get the paperwork done.”

The secretary bowed her head deeply and assented.

“Doc here will be in charge of me. I’ve already talked to the professor.”

“I am, am I?” said Kisaragi. He was used to the whimsy of the rich - and also the fact that being admitted on such short notice meant that something was going on.

“It’s to shut out the noisy flies, doc. You’ll make sure I can’t take visitors, right?”

Kisaragi remembered hearing that Tokyo District Public Prosecutors office had begun to stir about some issue concerning corruption and bribery with a politician belonging to the party in power. He personally thought nothing of it. He had not a single interest in politics.

“Understood,” Kisaragi said without asking any questions. Arima strode breezily out the door with his secretary in tow.

[350,000*](#) About \$3,500.

Chapter 2

“Excuse me, Mr. Arima. I’m coming in,” Kisaragi knocked as he spoke to the door. He counted to twenty in his head and opened the door to the special room.

The special room was located on the top floor, and had a 356-square-foot parlor, with 267-square-foot room for the patient, and two small bedrooms. Apart from the elevators located at the hospital entrance, the room also had its own elevator that connected directly to the underground parking lot. One did not even have to pass the nurse’s station to get to this room.

Kisaragi had counted to twenty out of consideration for any visitors. It had been one week since Arima had been admitted. The number of visitors he had every day was more than you could count on two hands. The “No Visitors Allowed” placard served no purpose. More than once he would see a visitor whose face he recognized from television.

On one occasion, the nurse had checked up on him at nighttime and reacted with a cry, having walked into the midst of a lovemaking session.

By waiting, Kisaragi meant to give Arima time to go to the adjoining bedroom if he was in the midst of something he would rather not be seen doing.

Kisaragi stepped carefully into the room to find Arima reclining in the parlor armchair. His secretary attended beside him. The sofa in front of Arima was occupied by a man in a black suit.

The professor’s medical certificate indicated the diagnosis as

“hypertension, post-surgery for pancreatic cancer, diabetes, pancreatic insufficiency.” Treatment would take one month.

Of course, Arima had undergone no such treatment at all. Although he was being provided with 1,800 kilocalories’ worth of low-fat meals by the hospital, Arima ordered room service through his secretary.

Today, just like any other, Arima had a Japanese kaiseki course meal laid out before him and was sipping from a sake cup although it was still daytime.

“Ah, doc,” he nodded as when he saw Kisaragi. “Sorry to bother you. Would you be able to look at this guy’s hand?” He jerked his chin toward the man sitting in front of him. Kisaragi shifted his gaze to the man.

He had never seen this man before. The man’s jawline was square and set, his lips full but taut. His nose was slightly crooked, perhaps from being broken once. Beneath his thick, dark eyebrows were a pair of dark eyes that were reminiscent of fathomless darkness.

Those dark eyes glinted as soon as they landed on Kisaragi. Kisaragi felt himself shrink back at his menacing demeanor. Arima laughed loudly.

“Kanesaki, don’t scare him. He’s my precious doctor. Doc, meet Daiki Kanasaki.”

Kanesaki said nothing as his eyes shifted away. Kisaragi let out a breath and approached the sofa. The man’s hands were resting on his knees. Both of them were scarred on the back and looked like the skin had broken.

“I’m Yu Kisaragi. What’s the matter?” he asked quietly. The man fixed him again with a sharp look.

“Surprising,” he muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“You sure have a pretty face like an actor, but I didn’t think your name would sound like one, too.”

Kisaragi did not know how to answer that. “What’s the matter?” he asked again, finally. The man silently held out his right hand.

“It hurts.”

Kisaragi sat down beside him and took the man’s right hand. He turned it over, bothered by the scars on the back, and found the same small scar on the other side.

“My middle knuckle,” Kanesaki said. Kisaragi probed the man’s thick palm with his slender finger.

“It looks like a ganglion cyst. It’s quite big. You must have had trouble moving your finger.”

“What do I need to do?”

“It’ll be hard to remove with surgery, since there are tendons and nerves going through it. It might be best to drain the contents.”

“Do it,” Arima said as he picked up a slice of sashimi with his chopsticks. “He’d have to wait if he goes into the outpatient ward, wouldn’t he? He’s a busy guy.”

Kisaragi nodded and said it was possible. “I just have to disinfect it and drain it with a syringe. It’ll be over quickly. Over here, please.” Kisaragi stood up to lead Kanesaki. They passed in front of the nurse’s station toward the treatment room. Kanesaki stared at his surroundings with his sharp gaze.

“Nice floor. I can see why they call it the special room,” he muttered. “Are visitors turned away there?”

There was a glass door that led into the elevator lobby and hospital ward, with an intercom to connect the two spaces.

“Do you doctors have to go through that, too?”

“We get in with our key cards,” Kisaragi replied, pointing at the card embedded into his name plaque. “The private elevator can only be accessed from the patient’s room’s side.”

With that, Kisaragi opened the door to the treatment room and ushered Kanesaki in. After sitting the man down on the bed, he began to take out the necessary instruments from the treatment stand. He disinfected the puncture point with a cotton swab soaked in isotonic iodine. Even after showing Kanesaki the 18-gauge needle he would inject, the man showed no signs of asking for anesthesia.

“Would you like me to give you a local anesthetic?” Kisaragi offered.

“I’d rather it be finished quickly.”

Kisaragi nodded and inserted the syringe without anesthetic. The man not so much as twitched his hand. Only when Kisaragi announced that it was finished did he say his first words.

“Alright,” he said. “Thanks.”

When they returned to Arima’s room, he had already emptied his second small bottle of *sake*.

“Doc, I’d advise you to get Kanesaki’s business card. In the entertainment district, it’d come in much more handy than mine.”

At Arima’s words, Kanesaki took out a black leather wallet from his inner pocket. The business card read, “Ostrocia Trading Company.”

“You’re Representative Director, I see.”

“On the outside,” Arima chimed in. “But *yakuza* is his trade.” After his bald statement, the man burst into loud laughter. “He comes in handy. He arranges for all of my dirty work to be done.”

Kisaragi looked at the business card with unease.

“Are you sure you want to tell me that?”

Arima stared at him with his beady eyes. “You’re not interested in anything. Not in money, in fame, or in women. That’s why I can trust you.”

Arima had nailed him. Kisaragi unwittingly looked away. The man burst into loud laughter again.

“One of these days I’d like to see what you look like in ecstasy.”

Kisaragi put the business card away in his pocket without answering. Once Kanesaki had left, Arima continued where he had left off.

“That guy,” he said, “is someone I picked up at a club in Roppongi. He was a gopher for some penny-pinching *yakuza*. But that guy is smart. I took him under my wing, raised him, and let him have his own company.”

“...Right.”

Arima picked up a slice of horsemeat *sashimi* and swallowed it in one gulp. He proceeded to devour the tempura. Kisaragi watched quietly as Arima polished off dish after dish.

Once he had finished his luxurious lunch, Arima glanced over at Kisaragi again.

“So? How was it?”

“No abnormalities in your test results so far.”

“I’d have thought so.”

After Arima was finished eating, he turned to study Kisaragi.

“I hear the first few years after birth determines whether or not you become obese. If you’re malnourished, those - what do you call them - mast cells - don’t multiply.”

“That’s what they say.”

“I was the son of a poor farmer in the Tohoku region. When I couldn’t feed myself anymore, I joined the army. I went through hell in Manchuria and almost died of starvation. I was past forty before I had my first decent filling meal.”

Although it was a story he had heard a number of times before, Kisaragi silently listened. Arima wiped his mouth with a napkin and directed his small eyes at Kisaragi again.

“I paid about [3,000,000*](#) to the professor for being admitted this time. How much do you want?”

When Kisaragi slowly shook his head, Arima shrugged. “I knew you’d say that. I looked you up, and you’re from a good family. Family owns a hospital. Eldest son’s inherited the family business. You have nothing to want for.”

“I wouldn’t say so.”

“But there’s nothing that you would want that I have.”

“That’s right,” Kisaragi answered.

“Honest, aren’t you?” said Arima with an agreeable smile. “No matter. Maybe sometime down the road you’ll find something you want.”

[350,000*](#) About 30,000 dollars.

Chapter 3

Kisaragi left the satellite clinic at six o'clock sharp and headed for the hotel lobby. He was scheduled to meet a colleague, a doctor of the same cohort. Satoshi Hasunuma. He was a psychiatrist. Three years ago, the man had returned to Chiba to take after his family's hospital. Today he was back in Tokyo to receive training to renew his license as a designated psychiatrist.

Although he lived in Chiba, it was in the Sotobo area on the coastline of the Pacific Ocean, and wasn't too far from Tokyo. In his first year back home, Hasunuma had visited Tokyo whenever he had the chance, but in his second year he had expanded his business and had not had the chance to visit as often. For Kisaragi, it had been about a year since they had last seen each other.

Hasunuma arrived spectacularly late. His fearless-looking face was tanned, and his outfit of a contrast-collar button-down shirt and double-breasted suit made him look more like the president of some company rather than a doctor.

They got a seat in the hotel lounge and ordered coffee.

"You've certainly developed the air of a chairman."

"Hey, no teasing."

"Is that a golfing tan?"

"No, it's from surfing," replied Hasunuma. "My hair's gotten redder too, see?" he said somewhat proudly, pinching his short hair for Kisaragi to see.

"So you're a surfer now?"

“Yeah. I surf with my patients. Occupational therapy.”

Hasunuma’s hospital was a psychiatric hospital which accepted patients not only with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, but also those with drug and alcohol addictions. Kisaragi had heard that they had built a new wing for Morita therapy.

Kisaragi nodded in understanding. “By the way, you haven’t eaten yet, right?”

Hasunuma’s face suddenly clouded. “Sorry. I actually don’t have time. I didn’t think the training would go on for so long. I actually have to be at the New National Theatre by seven.”

“What?” Kisaragi tilted his head, unable to see where Hasunuma was going with the conversation.

“It’s, um... ballet. I made a promise to go watch....” Hasunuma sighed and shrugged in an exaggerated way. “Ballet, can you believe? Only women and children watch that stuff.”

In their high school days, Hasunuma had been the captain of the football team, and a typical athlete. Although his gallant good looks drew the attention of the girls, Hasunuma himself insisted he would master both art and sports, and not so much as strayed off the path to play such games. But Kisaragi mentally agreed that ballet didn’t go with Hasunuma’s image.

“What’s the occasion?”

“It’s, uh... match-making. She’s brought someone over - my aunt, I mean. And after it’s done, we’re supposed to go out to eat.”

Kisaragi felt his body go cold, but replied in a bright voice. “I see. Well, it’s no surprise,” he said. “You’re probably up next. There aren’t many of us left in

our cohort who haven't tied the knot yet."

"Not for you to say," Hasunuma said.

Kisaragi answered with an easy smile. He had fooled many people this way.

Chapter 4

The throng of men moved like shadows under the dim lights on the dance floor. Some grinded against each other as if imitating sex. There was a square boxing ring that stood out sorely in the middle of the spacious room, and the white mat seemed to glow faintly.

Matches were conducted occasionally, and on those nights the floor teemed with crazed cheers for both sides. But now the floor was simply immersed in the strains of a slow ballad by Bon Jovi. The men in the room were occupied with only one purpose - to find a companion for the night.

The club was called Guys, and it was where people gathered for relations with no strings attached. Kisaragi had been a regular for nearly ten years now.

Gays who sought an emotional connection eventually began to feel unsatisfied and drifted somewhere else. Those who kept on coming back were those who came with the purpose of having sex, and that aligned with Kisaragi's own purposes, too.

They would signal to each other with their eyes, making barely any conversation, and would vent their pent-up sexual energy in a small room on the second floor. The room was bare. With nothing but a sofa and a sink, it was only slightly better than a toilet. Some people chose to go to a hotel rather than put up with the appalling conditions, but Kisaragi always turned down such offers to be "taken out".

Once the deed was done, he would return to the first floor. If he felt like it, he searched for someone else. Sometimes he would go straight home to his condo instead.

It was Kisaragi's custom to visit Guys about twice a month. On this day, he took his time sipping a shot on the rocks.

It was widely known here that sex with Kisaragi was brittle and lacking in warmth. Although Kisaragi's face was hard to resist for many men, he was

seldom propositioned because of this fact. Newcomers always got hooked on him once, but often stopped making offers after a few times in bed because of Kisaragi's lack of affection.

This aligned perfectly with Kisaragi's own objectives. It was also why he had taken a liking to this club.

Eventually a man in a suit took a seat beside him. "Long time no see," he said. Kisaragi stared up at his face, vaguely remembering that the man had called himself Jiro once. They had slept together two or three times. The sex was mediocre.

"Yu, right? Care for one?"

"Sure," Kisaragi nodded, moving away from the counter. Once they entered the room, Jiro was quick to make his move.

"Put on a condom," Kisaragi said.

Jiro shook his head as if in exasperation, and headed toward the vending machine beside the sink. Since the condom was coated in jelly, they were able to begin the act immediately. Everything about it seemed like cheap fast food.

Once Jiro had put on the condom, he proceeded to pin Kisaragi on the sofa and insert himself.

"Funny, isn't it, even though you're so hot down here. You know people call you the ice queen?"

Kisaragi did not answer as he felt the thickness of the thing within him. He stared at the fluorescent light on the ceiling, unremarkable like any other.

"How is it, Yu? Am I good?" Jiro moaned as he moved his hips. When he brought his face closer for a kiss, Kisaragi blocked him with his palm.

"Same as always, huh, Yu? But I actually like it like that." Jiro grinned as he began to rub Kisaragi's member. "I can see that this here isn't connected to your heart."

"I don't like to be chatty. Shut up and move."

"Fine," Jiro said, smiling widely again, gyrating his hips in large motions. "Coming right up, princess."

Once he felt his temperature rise, Kisaragi finally closed his eyes.

You have no carnal instinct.

Kisaragi suddenly heard the words at his ear - words he had heard long ago. His body twitched. Jiro grunted on top of him.

“Don’t squeeze me like that, Yu!”

His words did not reach Kisaragi, who was envisioning the face of the man he had parted with earlier.

“Don’t you have *any* impulses?” Hasunuma had asked him, one night over some drinks.

Of course I do.

It was true. One only needed to peel back a thin layer to reveal the writhing desire beneath. *That’s why I’m having this kind of sex. I rid myself of my desires so that I don’t direct any at you. When it builds up, I let it out. That’s it. I vent before it starts to seep through. Just like this. Mechanical.*

Kisaragi clenched the stiff desire that moved within him, trying to get a grasp of it.

“Ahh, Yu, it’s so good! I can feel it - you’re unbelievable-“ Jiro continued to vocalize noisily as he repeated his pistons. Kisaragi closed his eyes as he waited for the moment to arrive.

He let out a quiet noise as he released himself.

“Yu, Yu, ah, it’s so good!” Moments later, Jiro also released himself as he collapsed on top of Kisaragi. As he lay there breathing raggedly, Kisaragi pushed him off roughly.

“Get off of me.”

Jiro heaved a sigh as he proceeded to pull out. His member was still half-erect as he pulled the condom off and tossed it into the garbage bin. He looked sadly at Kisaragi, who was pulling his pants on.

“Aloof as always, aren’t you?” he said.

“Yes.” Kisaragi looked coolly at Jiro.

After that, Kisaragi allowed two more men to straddle him that night. Although he had only climaxed once, he decided to wrap it up and leave.

As he stepped outside of the club, the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden located across sprawled before his eyes, with its black cluster of trees and surrounding walls. Although the club was classified as being on Shinjuku Ni-Chome, the building which housed the club was actually located physically apart from Shinuku Ni-Chome, on the south side of Meijidori. Kisaragi was always greeted with the barren sight after he had finished his business in the club. He sneered inwardly at himself, as he always did, at the way it seemed to reflect his inner soul.

Without anywhere to go in particular, Kisaragi headed toward Shinjuku Station.

Chapter 5

Kisaragi was having a drink at a cramped bar.

There were no other customers except for him. Two women with thick makeup were eating rice balls in a corner. He had ended up in Kabukicho in search of the crowds and noise, and had followed a random touter into the bar.

Kisaragi mechanically knocked back his brandy. He had never been one to get drunk easily. In a sense, he had turned to sex to forget his problems because alcohol did not allow him to.

But tonight, he couldn't even turn to sex to distract him. Needless to say, it was because he had been faced with the harsh reality that Hasunuma was getting married. Although Hasunuma had said it was only a matchmaking session, Kisaragi figured he would eventually get married.

What am I thinking?

Hasunuma had never belonged to him, and never would. Kisaragi scoffed at himself for the toll that the news was taking on him. *I guess that means I still had hope when I thought I'd abandoned it all.*

He had been in high school when he started to realize that perhaps other males were the object of his sexual desire. When he started attending university and met Hasunuma, that suspicion turned to certainty. He was also equally certain that his crush would never be requited.

Don't you have any impulses?

Kisaragi had dismissed the question with a laugh.

Hasunuma was like the sun, with his cheerful personality. He was trusted by his upperclassmen and looked up to by his underclassmen. From what Kisaragi heard, he had been president of the student council in high school.

Hasunuma called Kisaragi his best friend. Kisaragi, on the other hand, desperately hid his desires. Why did he have to live like this, with such sunken spirits? Hidden in the shadows, like a plant that produced no flowers or fruit?

The man would never be his, anyway; and if that was the case, Kisaragi wished he could degrade him, humiliate him, and destroy him. He wanted Hasunuma to go through the same feelings he had gone through.

But who would be able to guess that Kisaragi housed such a violent beast within him?

One day, I might end up hurting him.

Kisaragi was gripped by fear. Although he carried ambivalent feelings of love toward Hasunuma, he could not bring himself to hurt him. If Kisaragi could not destroy him, he had no choice but to destroy himself.

He had fleeting sexual encounters and refused any soulful connection with people.

Back when he had first began visiting Guys, he was straddled by as many as five different men per night. As Kisaragi satisfied his self-destructive impulses, he felt liberated for the first time.

This is the way I should be. Fallen.

He felt as if it was a way to balance his contrasting outward appearance of a competent and well-renowned physician.

By the time Kisaragi had gone through a whole bottle of brandy, even he was a little unsteady on his feet.

“The bill,” he said to the waiter. He looked at the number on the slip and could not help but laugh. “I see. This must be what they call those rip-off bars.”

Two waiter stood in front of Kisaragi. At the entrance of the bar was a well-built man in a black suit with his back against the door.

“Unfortunately, this is all I have.” Kisaragi took out three [10,000 yen bills*](#) from his shirt pocket. He could laugh or cry, but this was still all he had. He carried a minimal amount of cash when he went to Guys. He made sure not to carry his driver’s license or credit card, or anything else that could identify him. He didn’t mind ending up dead in a ditch somewhere. The only thing that tied him to his identity was the watch he wore. If it was stolen, he would be an unidentified body. But that was also Kisaragi’s wish.

He didn’t care about the insults that would be directed at him after death. Once dead, that was the end for him.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to make do with this.”

“Ain’t gonna happen,” said one of the waiters who had a thuggish-looking face.

“I really don’t have any money.”

The waiter gave Kisaragi a pat-down, with the man in the black suit standing by.

“Manager, he’s right. He’s not even carrying a cell phone.”

The man in the black suit wore an exasperated expression. “Are you kidding me? Let’s see if he can phone a friend.”

“No way,” Kisaragi said. “But if you want to beat me up, go ahead.”

“Unfortunately we can’t do that. Laws against bars that rip people off,” added the man in the black suit, his lips twisting in disdain. He reached out to grab Kisaragi’s chin. “He’s a pretty one. Should we sell him off so he can get gang-banged?”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” Kisaragi gave a bitter smile. Perhaps it wasn’t such a bad idea to fall until he could fall no further. Perhaps it would be better so he would never harbor any false hopes again.

The man in the black suit appeared disturbed that his words had no seemed to instill any fear into Kisaragi.

“But money comes first. We’ll keep him here until tomorrow and make him call his workplace.”

“I won’t.”

While they conversed, the waiter gave Kisaragi another pat-down, and pulled out a business card from his trouser pocket.

“He was carrying this.”

“Oh,” Kisaragi said, widening his narrow eyes. “Someone gave that to me. I don’t know him.”

“Then you can pray to the heavens that he’s nice enough to save your ass.” The waiter took out his cell phone. “Hello? Is this Mr. Kanesaki? Your friend wants to talk to you.”

Kisaragi reluctantly took the phone.

“Who is this?” said a deep voice.

“It’s Yu Kisaragi,” Kisaragi answered.

“Oh, that doctor who looks like an actor. Thanks for today. So, what do you want at this hour of the night?”

“Some trouble has come up,” Kisaragi said crisply. The man in the black suit swiped the cell phone back.

“Your friend here tried to dine and dash. I’m wondering if you can foot the bill for him.”

Kisaragi regarded the man’s face in resignation, certain that Kanesaki would not agree. But the man’s face broke into a gleeful grin.

“He says he’ll pay. He’s on his way to pick you up now.”

“That’s absurd,” Kisaragi muttered.

“You can sit there and wait,” said the waiter as he shoved Kisaragi in the shoulder. Kisaragi half-tumbled into his seat.

About fifteen minutes later, the door was kicked open and a group of three men, quite obviously of the yakuza type, came striding in. The man in the black suit appeared bewildered as he stood up.

“Can I help you?”

“Cut the crap. You invited us here,” snarled one man with a bent nose, grabbing the man by the front of his shirt. “We came to pick up Mr. Kanesaki’s acquaintance, you hear?”

One of the men shoved the waiter out of the way and bowed deeply to Kisaragi. “We’ve come to escort you. Doctor, Mr. Kanesaki is waiting for you.”

“Right....” Kisaragi finally recalled what Arima had told him. *A shell company for his yakuza organization.* Kisaragi realized how useful the business card had really been. As he emerged from the bar amidst careful attention from

the gangsters, he saw a white Mercedes-Benz parked on the curb.

“Mr. Kanesaki, here he is.”

The driver opened the rear door widely for him. Similar to the other low-ranking members, he wore his hair tightly permed and sported a scar on his cheek. A man in a black suit sat inside.

“Get in, first, doctor, and we’ll talk.”

Kisaragi got in without saying anything.

“Get moving,” ordered Kanesaki. The Mercedes lurched into motion.

“Thank you,” Kisaragi said, bowing his head.

“No need. You took care of me earlier today.”

“No. That doesn’t nearly equal what you’ve done for me. Please let me give something back.”

Kanesaki directed his glinting eyes at Kisaragi.

“Alright. I think I will.”

[10,000 yen bills](#)*About \$100.

Chapter 6

The suite was located on the first floor of a large condominium facing Waseda-dori, close to Okubo. The glass door was adorned with gold lettering that read *Ostrocia Trading Company*, the same name as the one on Kanesaki's business card. Once inside, the suite looked like any other office. There were numerous office desks, a fax machine, and computers. A few workers were still in front of their computer monitors.

Kanesaki led the way as he walked toward the back of the office. Kisaragi followed silently behind him.

A part of the wooden panel was pressed open to reveal a spacious reception room for visitors. Kanesaki picked up a bottle of vodka from the sideboard, poured it straight into a glass, and came back toward Kisaragi.

"What were you doing at a place like that, doctor? It's not a place for a big-shot physician like you, working at such a big hospital."

Kisaragi took the proffered glass from him and smiled darkly. "It's perfectly suitable for me."

Kanesaki drained his glass in one draught and took off his suit jacket. He hooked a finger into the loop of his tie.

"You won't mind doing it here?" he said.

Kisaragi looked around, thinking it was ten times better than the second floor of Guys.

"As long as you don't moan so the neighbors hear," he replied.

“Oh?” Kanesaki’s mouth twitched into a grin for the first time. “You’re a strange one.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Kisaragi as he stared back at the man with steely eyes. Kanesaki loosened the belt on his pants.

“You weren’t scared at all when you left that place. Neither are you now. Why is that?”

“Other things scare me more.”

“I can’t imagine,” Kanesaki said as he pushed Kisaragi by the shoulders. “Lie down here.”

Kisaragi shook his head. “Not until you put on a condom.”

“Scared of catching something?” said Kanesaki in a joking way, to which Kisaragi could not help but retort.

“No, I’m not. But I’m a doctor. If I become an HIV carrier, I’ll end up causing trouble for everyone else.”

“I see. Said like a true professional. I like that.” Kanesaki detached himself and reached for his jacket. He took out his cell phone.

“It’s me. Get me some condoms.”

Moments later, the driver came in with a bag from Matsumoto Kiyoshi drug store. He offered it ceremoniously to Kanesaki. Kanesaki opened the box, took out one condom and broke the seal.

“One for me, too, please.” Kisaragi held out his hand.

“Why?” asked Kanesaki, furrowing his brow. “There’s no way you’d be carrying anything. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I don’t want to get my clothes dirty.”

Kanesaki looked surprised. “You were going to leave everything on but your pants?”

“That’s how I always do it.”

Kanesaki stopped mid-motion. “So that means I don’t need to take off my clothes, either?”

When Kisaragi nodded in assent, Kanesaki began buttoning up his shirt again. “That helps. I’d like to avoid the twenty-one questions if I could.”

Kisaragi remembered the scars on the back of the man’s hands. He figured the man would have a fair share of scars from fights and knife wounds and such, being someone with a *yakuza* background.

Kanesaki took one more condom out of the box and tossed it into Kisaragi’s lap.

“You’re a strange one,” he said again.

The man regarded Kisaragi steadily as he moved on top of him. Kisaragi felt like his eyes harbored some unfathomable darkness. He also felt like the man saw the same thing in his own eyes. Even during the moment of climax, the man’s eyes did not close. For a fleeting second, Kisaragi felt like he saw a barren field reflected in the man’s eyes. The moment Kisaragi realized that he, too, was seeing the same sight, he felt himself go over the edge.

Kanesaki moved off of him and removed his condom.

“Give me that.”

“What?” Kisaragi asked.

Kanesaki burst into loud laughter. “You *are* strange. I meant your condom. What else?”

“Oh.” Kisaragi propped himself up on the sofa. He peeled the condom off and handed it to Kanesaki, who tossed both condoms into the garbage. He tightened his belt as he headed back toward Kisaragi and peered into his face.

“I like what sex is like with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“How both of us do it purely to relieve ourselves and nothing else.”

The man had read his thoughts. Kisaragi averted his gaze.

“I don’t see what’s wrong with it,” Kanesaki continued. “It works for me.” He snatched the bottle of vodka and poured Kisaragi a liberal glass. “So, where have you been relieving yourself until now?”

Kisaragi took the glass and sipped a mouthful. The liquid left a burning sensation along with the bitter taste in his mouth.

“A club on Shinjuku Ni-Chome. With whomever I encountered that night.”

“Like in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*.

“Yeah.”

Kanesaki drained his glass and poured himself another. “Then switch to me from now on.”

It wasn’t a bad idea, Kisaragi thought.

Chapter 7

“What do I sell? Anything. Anything second-hand that people wouldn’t even bat an eye at in Japan.”

Kisaragi listened to the deep voice speak as he savored what was moving inside of him.

“People appreciate cars the most, but there are some in your field, too. Medical equipment. Russia is the worst. They use machines from nearly twenty years ago. They were free spenders at first, but not so much now. It’s because of the economic sanctions.”

Kisaragi had made arrangements to see Kanesaki in his suite once a week. Kanesaki lived on the top floor of the condominium where his company was located. His company traded mainly with Russia.

Although Kisaragi had no idea why, Kanesaki talked non-stop while they had sex. It wasn’t as if Kisaragi asked him any questions; Kanesaki simply spoke to him about all manner of things.

Kisaragi was taken aback at first, but since it didn’t seem to distract Kanesaki from the act at hand, he decided to listen. Although Kanesaki outwardly conducted trade, there was no way of knowing what he really did behind the façade.

“Oh,” the man said, “do you know anyone who’s got an ultrasound machine lying around that they don’t need anymore? Running out of space to stash it? Tell them I can take it off their hands.”

“-And what... are you...”

“I’m going to sell it, of course. To them,” Kanesaki said with a grin. On this night, too, they had just begun to engage in the act on the bed in his condo. And just as always, they both shed only their bottoms.

“I can’t do X-ray machines, though. Those are too big. Cardiograms and ultrasound machines are the best. Think about it, will you?”

Kisaragi felt like his voice would crack if he spoke now, so he only nodded. It was getting harder to restrain himself. He lifted his hips to angle them in a way that pleased him the most. Kanesaki let out a low laugh when he noticed. He put his hands on Kisaragi’s thighs and opened them wider. He then leaned in to penetrate him further.

“-Ah...!”

Kanesaki continued to speak even while he came and released himself.

“Medical conditions there are horrible. If a new virus were to land, you’d have tens of thousands dead.”

Once Kisaragi’s twitching stopped, Kanesaki peeled the condom off of his abated penis. “Don’t want it to spill,” he said as he threw it aside and moved away.

Back when he had slept with people at Guys, Kisaragi had found it unbearable to remain in the company of his partner after it was over. But now he found it wasn’t so bad when it was in a comfortable bed like this one.

Being rocked on a bed with good springs revived the sensation in his inner core and made it stir. His limp member began to stiffen again.

“You want to come again?” Kanesaki asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Kisaragi answered. It was strange; ever since he had begun to sleep with Kanesaki, his aching hunger had abated.

When he used to let men straddle him at Guys, he would fervently seek release when he felt the desire mount in him, thinking he would probably never see the man again. Perhaps he was more at ease now because he now had a constant partner he could depend on to rid himself of his desires.

“You’re a strange one, doctor,” Kanesaki said with an exasperated face as he looked down at him. “But enough of that. Don’t you have any influenza vaccines, or stuff like that? I’m actually scheduled to fly over there next week. I mean Russia. But it’s an area that’s close to the border of North Korea.”

“No,” answered Kisaragi, shaking his head. “Not until September.”

“Nothing you can do if you don’t have any.” Kanesaki shrugged and continued to move his hips.

“Are you going for work?”

“Of course. You think I’d go for a vacation?” Kanesaki gave a large thrust. “Arima is coming, too.”

“Mr. Arima, too? But he’s not?”

Kanesaki deftly switched positions and began to penetrate him from behind.

“Maybe he’ll demand to get discharged tomorrow or so. We get treated like VIPs when Arima is around. Over there, anyway. He’s like [Muneo](#)* the Second. He has connections to Russian language schools with the Foreign Ministry.”

“I’m not interested in politics.”

“I figured as much,” Kanesaki said as he groped Kisaragi’s lower half.
“You’re not interested in anything, are you?”

As the man’s fingers groped the tip of his penis, Kisaragi unwittingly answered by tightening his grip.

“I’ll catch what you spit out so you don’t get dirty. You want to come together?”

“Whatever you want,” Kisaragi said coldly. Kanesaki gave a wry smile.

“Same as always. But that’s what I like about you.”

They came at almost the same time, and collapsed on top of each other.

“Ah... it was so good, doctor. I like doing it from behind. It turns me on. Maybe it’s because you’re still wearing clothes and the only thing that’s showing is your ass. Maybe it’s because I feel like I’m raping you.”

“You enjoy rape?” *Probably because he’s one of the yakuza*, Kisaragi thought coolly.

“Are you crazy? I’ve never raped anyone. Most girls will spread their legs for me as long as I pay them. Same for men.”

“Then why...?”

Kanesaki laughed loudly. “I wonder why. Maybe it’s because it’s you. You’re pretty, elite, and you live in a totally different world. Someone I could never have. Maybe I like it because it feels like I’m ravaging a princess.”

Kisaragi glared in exasperation at the man’s face, which was right up close to his.

“I’m not pretty.”

“What’re you saying? That face is as pretty as they come. Don’t other

people tell you that?”

Kisaragi sighed and buried his face in the pillow. “Looks are simply a layer of skin. And besides, for man it doesn’t matter how good his looks are.”

Kanesaki’s large hand caught his chin and twisted it to face him. “In other words, there’s a man for whom your good looks are meaningless. I see.”

Kisaragi snapped his eyes open wide and stared into Kanasaki’s dark ones. Kanasaki roared with laughed as he began to thrust his hips again. “I see. That’s how it is, huh, doctor?”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s just exactly what I mean.” Kanasaki pressed his lips to the man’s pale neck. “You’re in love with a straight guy. And that’s why you’ve run to self-destruction and you’ll sleep with anyone.”

“Stop making up stories,” Kisaragi said, but he knew the man could sense the tension in his body from his agitation.

“So I’m right.”

“Shut up!” Kisaragi twisted and tried to push Kanasaki off of him, but the man gripped his hips tightly so he could not move.

“In the end you’re just a sheltered boy,” Kanasaki said. “You underestimated me. But...” he paused as he thrust upwards into him. Kisaragi felt the shaft within him grow larger, and whimpered as he felt the pleasure being drawn out of him.

“...But that’s what I like about you,” Kanasaki continued. “It’s the first time I’ve found you cute.” Kanasaki then propped himself up, with his arms supporting Kisagari’s hips, and penetrated him again.

“You look like you’re in a bad mood,” Kanesaki said as his face moved to obstruct his view of the ceiling.

“Of course. My shirt is soiled.”

Kanesaki stopped mid-motion as he was wiping Kisaragi down. “Just wear one of mine.” He looked so gleeful as he brought his face close that Kisaragi chewed his lip in irritation. He was also infuriated that he had been goaded into climaxing by this man. When he turned his face aside huffily, Kanesaki let out a loud laugh and roughly mussed Kisaragi’s hair.

“You’re cute, doctor.” Kanesaki got off the bed and brought a shirt back from the closet. “Let me put this on you.”

Kisaragi felt too listless to bother fighting back, and let the man’s hands unclothe him. Kanesaki draped the shirt over him and rubbed his shoulders. Kisaragi could feel the heat from the man’s large palms, and felt his eyelids begin to droop.

“...I’m sleepy.”

“Then go to sleep,” Kanesaki murmured as Kisaragi began to nod off. “I won’t be able to see you for a while. I’ll get in touch when I get back. Wait for me.”

Chapter 8

The next day, Kisaragi visited the hospital's special room to find Arima enjoying a luxurious lunch as usual. Today it was a French full-course meal. Kisaragi walked in just as Arima was sipping from his generously-poured glass of Pétrus.

"Care for a glass with me?" Arima offered.

"I'm working right now."

Arima shrugged, drained his glass, and looked up at Kisaragi with his round, beady eyes.

"I'd like to be discharged tomorrow."

"Understood." Kisaragi looked back at Arima. It was just as Kanesaki had said.

"I have to get back to work soon." Arima poured himself another glass as he forked a slice of Cheateaubriand steak into his mouth.

"Are you travelling to Russia?"

Arima's fork paused. "Oh?" he said amusedly. "Who did you hear that from?"

"From Mr. Kanesaki."

Arima jerked his chin toward the sofa, encouraging Kisaragi to sit down. "I'm surprised to know that you have something going on with the likes of him, doctor."

“I thought he would have told you already.”

There was no way Arima wouldn't have already known. Arima neither affirmed nor denied it as he peered into Kisaragi's face.

“Doctor, do you know that guy's real name?”

Kisaragi hesitated at the phrase.

“The Chinese characters in his name are read ‘Daiki Kin.’ His first name is written like ‘large tree’ and it's pronounced Daesu.”

“I see.” The discovery of the man's Korean name stirred nothing within Kisaragi. He figured the man must have his own set of circumstances. Arima cracked a grin at Kisaragi's blank face.

“Just like you, doctor. I bet you don't even ask him anything personal.”

It was true. All Kisaragi did was listen to the other man talk. If Kanesaki wanted to keep silent about things he didn't want to talk about, then so be it. Kisaragi himself hadn't said anything about Hasunuma, either.

Arima continued to speak while cutting his steak. “The guy came here over thirty years ago and naturalized. He's a bona fide Japanese national. Otherwise, his passport would have given him too much hassle to hold down a job in a trading company. Travel has gotten a bit better now, though.”

Kisaragi listened silently to Arima talk.

“Has he told you what he does?” Arima asked. “Illegal money transfers. Some of it transits through Russia and goes up north. And that's not it - when the money comes back, it comes back in the form of drugs and guns and whatnot.”

Arima peered into Kisaragi's face again. “He doesn't live in the same world

you do. You shouldn't get involved with him."

The man, for some reason, was wearing a worried[m1] look. Kisaragi got up from the sofa without answering.

"I'll transfer your message to Admissions and Discharges," he said.

Chapter 9

“Dr. Kisaragi, there’s a call for you on line one. Someone called Mr. Kanesaki. Can I transfer him to you?” The soft voice of the clinic receptionist reached his ears.

“Sure,” Kisaragi replied simply. He pressed the flashing button and leaned back slowly in his seat.

“Doctor, it’s me,” a slightly raspy voice reached his ear. “I know I promised we would meet up, but I can’t do tonight,” he said, before Kisaragi could open his mouth. “Believe it or not, I’m sick. Me, out of all people. I haven’t been feeling too well.”

This was Kisaragi’s first time hearing anything close to weak-willed from the man.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Maybe it’s food poisoning. My stomach hurts. I’m throwing up. It’s unbearable.” The man’s voice indeed sounded unusually listless.

“Do you have a fever?”

“I’m not sure. My whole body aches.”

Kisaragi deduced that the man likely did have a temperature. “Did you go to a doctor?”

“No. I just took some medicine I bought from Matsumoto Kiyoshi, but I

threw up again.”

Kisaragi checked his watch. It was six-thirty. The clinic closed at seven.

“Hang in there for thirty more minutes. I’ll come and do a house call.”

“Really?” Kanesaki groaned. “I’ll send someone to pick you up, then.”

Someone arrived at five minutes before seven, but it wasn’t the usual driver. It was a man with tightly permed hair who looked like the stereotypical *yakuza*. Although many of those types gathered in Shinjuku, where the clinic was located, the clinic itself was nevertheless a high-end one; the likes of *yakuza* had never stepped through its doors. Naturally, the receptionist and nurses were visibly disturbed at the sight of the man.

“Sorry fer the trouble, doctor,” the man said with the characteristic *yakuza* twang, bowing his head deeply as soon as he entered the director’s office. “Let me take yer bag.”

Kisaragi shed his lab coat and put it away in his locker before following after the man.

Kanesaki was lying uncovered on the bed in his bedroom. He was lying on his side, hugging his knees in a fetal position. *His stomach must hurt a lot*, Kisaragi thought as he approached. He spotted the soles of the man’s bare feet that showed from the trouser legs of his pyjamas.

What...?

The man’s soles were covered in scars that looked like broken skin. They looked like old wounds. *But never mind that - I have to focus on what’s at hand.* Kisaragi approached the man’s bedside and took out a stethoscope.

“Can you roll onto your back?”

“Hey... doctor.” Kanesaki greeted him lethargically as he obeyed and rolled over. His cheeks were sunken and his lips were dry. When Kisaragi laid a hand on his forehead, it was hot. The man was worse off than he had imagined.

Once he unbuttoned the front of the man’s pyjamas, Kisaragi was met with another unexpected sight. There was a large scar running from his armpit to his stomach and numerous other abrasions.

I see. These scars were not the kind that resulted from a typical fight, especially scars on the soles of the feet and the arches. The same could be said for the scars that spanned the back of the man’s hands to his palms. Kisaragi shrank back for a moment in fear, but put the stethoscope on anyway and felt the man’s belly.

“How does it feel here?”

“It hurts a bit.”

“How about here?”

“It feels fine.”

They exchanged a bare minimum of words until, before long, Kisaragi was finished his examination.

“I think you have the stomach flu. You’re severely dehydrated, so we should get you an IV drip. I’ll also run you through some blood tests.”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

Kisaragi asked for the wooden coat rack to be brought over as an IV stand. He determined the route with an angiogram, took a blood sample, and hooked Kanesaki up to a bag of Ringer’s solution. He directed the *yakuza* who

had shown him here to go out to buy some ice.

“Buy a set of top-class sushi while you’re at it,” barked Kanesaki at the man as he hastily made his way out. Kisaragi widened his eyes in disbelief.

“What are you thinking?”

“It’s not for me, idiot. It’s for you.”

Once they were alone together, Kisaragi moved his chair to Kanesaki’s bedside and sat down. He picked up the towel that had been left there and wiped the man’s forehead. Kanesaki closed his eyes and let Kisaragi do as he pleased. Some moments later, he opened his mouth.

“Doctor, were you surprised at my body?” he murmured.

“I wasn’t surprised. I’d heard over the phone that you weren’t feeling well.”

“No, I meant the scars.”

“Oh,” Kisaragi said, pausing in the midst of wiping the man down. “I’m a doctor, so scars don’t disgust or scare me. But I was surprised.”

“Sounds exactly like something you’d say.” Kanesaki opened his eyes a sliver and slightly raised the corners of his mouth.

Kanesaki’s voice regained some energy once he was nearly finished receiving his second 500 cc bag of infusion. Kisaragi lowered the infusion rate slightly and hooked him up to a third bag.

The *yakuza* subordinate had diligently remained to replenish the container of ice according to Kisaragi’s directions, but Kisaragi let him leave once Kanesaki’s fever abated.

“Hope you feel better soon, Mr. Kanesaki,” the man said. “The Young

Boss says he'd come by to see how you're doing tomorrow or so." The *yakuza* bowed so low that he was almost full bent over before leaving the room. Kisaragi sighed.

"Not a fan of *yakuza*?" Kanesaki asked.

"Of course not," Kisaragi answered. Kanesaki laughed out loud.

"You could say I'm a *yakuza* myself. Actually, I *am* a *yakuza*." Kanesaki kept his head laid on his pillow as he directed his glinting gaze at Kisaragi. "You heard my real name from Mr. Arima, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"He says you didn't flinch, wince, anything."

"What, did you want me to be surprised?"

Kanesaki laughed again. "Sounds like something you'd say." The man looked up at the ceiling. "I came here on the turn of the seventies. When Akasaka and Roppongi were in their heyday. The streets were filled with equal parts white whores, equal parts CIA agents. Politicians took the money that came from Lockheeds and Grummans and refunded it in Las Vegas."

Kisaragi nodded. "I've heard of Lockheed and Grumman."

"Have you heard of TSK-CCC?"

Kisaragi shook his head.

"It was a luxury club located in the best part of Roppongi. It competed with the Copa Cabanas and the Latin Quarter in Akasaka. It's been torn down now - you won't find a trace of it. But it was a high-end whorehouse. The guy who established it was a top dog *yakuza*. I used to be an erruand[m1] boy there. I was about fifteen then."

That was when he'd been picked up by Arima.

"I don't know why, but he took a liking to me. He sent me to school. I even went to America."

But before he had been picked up—

"It was pretty bad. There wasn't much I could do other than become a *yakuza*. I could barely speak any Japanese when I just came here." Kanesaki looked at him with dark eyes. "*Yakuza* are like the dredges of society. But I was worse than that. And the guys who tortured me back in my country were even lower."

So the man had endured those wounds when he had not yet turned fifteen, Kisaragi thought. The 1970s. Who had been the leader of Japan's neighboring company back then? The nation was so close, yet Kisaragi knew nothing about it.

"North or South - it doesn't matter. I abandoned my country. I naturalized," Kanesaki said shortly. Kisaragi reached out and touched Kanesaki's hair. He went on to gently stroke the man's head. He didn't know what else he could do.

Kanesaki spent the rest of the night talking about his days after arriving in Japan, as if in a delirious fever. He talked about the women he had been in relationships with, and some things that Kisaragi found hard to listen to, but he stayed silent and continued to stroke the man's hair.

"It's money. I want money. You understand? As long as I have money, I can get anything I want."

Kisaragi shook his head. There were things that money couldn't buy. But he made a point not to object and continued to listen without protest to the

man's story.

"You wouldn't understand. Not about people like us."

Kisaragi nodded in agreement.

"But that's fine. The ones who act like they understand—those people are the worst. You're honest. That's what I like."

By morning, Kanesaki had recovered.

"I'm gonna wet my pants," he said, hastily dashing into the bathroom after Kisaragi had removed his IV needle. "I didn't piss at all yesterday, you know," he yelled loudly over his own urinating as the door lay wide open.

"You must have been severely dehydrated," Kisaragi replied as he finally picked up a piece of the sushi that the *yakuza* had brought. Although it had gone stale and dry from being left out, he could not let the kind gesture go to waste. Kisaragi was even beginning to feel an affection toward the men who so blindly and devotedly served Kanesaki. Kisaragi chewed his food with a wry smile at the loud sound coming from the bathroom.

"The least you can do is close the door."

"No. I want you to hear it."

"You have a scatology fetish?"

"If that's what you want to call it." Kanesaki's laughter echoed in the bathroom. Once he returned to the bedroom, the man thrust his hips out and showed himself off to Kisaragi.

"Look how lively he is now. How about a round?"

Kisaragi turned away in exasperation. “You shouldn’t strain yourself. Don’t take flus and colds lightly. This time it was the stomach flu, but if it had been a cold that affected the cardiac muscles, you could have died of cardiac arrest,” he said severely.

“Alright,” Kanesaki gave in promptly. “I’ll do as you say, doctor.” He draped a bathrobe over his pyjamas and went to the window to open the curtains.

“It’s already past dawn. I ended up making you stay overnight.” The man turned around, his eyes softening in a smile. “I need to thank you. Next time I go to Russia, I’ll buy you a bucket full of the best caviar.”

“Caviar?” Kisaragi shook his head in refusal.

“You really don’t have any wants, do you?”

“It’s not that. It’s just... caviar is too salty,” Kisaragi said. “If you insist on buying some, just a little is fine. Personally, I think top-notch salmon roe tastes better.”

“I agree,” Kanesaki said. “A little spoonful of caviar with squeezed lemon is good, but salmon roe definitely goes better with a big bowl of rice.” He laughed loudly as he drew closer to Kisaragi and clapped him on the shoulder.

“To think you and I would be on the same wavelength over food. Say, do you like crab?” Kanesaki bent down and brought his face close to Kisaragi’s. Before Kisaragi could turn his face away, the man’s lips were pressed against his. Kanesaki drew away a few seconds later.

“I’m going to Niigata next week. I’ll bring some back as a souvenir.”

Chapter 10

It has been just over ten days.

When Kisaragi arrived at the condominium, Kanesaki greeted him in a bathrobe.

“Go out and buy a [unaju](#)* or something,” he commanded the driver, then took Kisaragi’s hand and pulled him into the bedroom. “I appreciate that work is busy, but the downside is that I get to see less of you.”

The man shed his bathrobe to reveal his naked body underneath. He pushed Kisaragi down on the bed and hooked a hand on his pants.

“You don’t mind if I’m naked, right? To tell you the truth, it’s hard to move around in clothes. And I don’t have to worry about explaining my scars anymore.”

The man tore off Kisaragi’s underwear and pressed his erect member up against him.

“Oh, but this guy needs to be clothed,” Kanesaki said as he reached for the bedside table. Kisaragi stopped him.

“I don’t mind.”

“What?”

“Remember the blood test you went through? I know I shouldn’t have,

but I had you checked.”

“Oh,” Kanesaki said.

“It’s been three months since we started having relations,” Kisaragi continued. “It’s past the virus’ incubation period.”

“HIV, huh. But?” the man paused, glancing at Kisaragi. “What if I’m not using a condom when I’m sleeping with other people?”

“Do you?” Kisaragi asked him in earnest. Kanesaki looked down at him and sighed.

“Doctor, you... you’ve been raised too proper. You shouldn’t be hanging around someone like me.”

“It’s too late to say that now.”

“I know that,” Kanesaki said as he scratched his head with his thick fingers. He stared at the condom in his hand. “Well, doctor? What about you? Will you put one on?”

Kisaragi glanced between his own member, still flaccid, and Kanesaki’s rearing, fierce one.

“Well... but that would be awkward, too.”

“Then take your shirt off. It’ll get wet.”

Kisaragi agreed and took off his clothes as well. This the first time he and Kanesaki were having bare skin-on-skin contact. He could feel the man’s searing body heat directly on his skin. Kanesaki lifted Kisaragi’s hips, got up on his knees, and leaned backwards.

“I like moving like this. I can see myself go inside you clearly. See?” he said as he pulled out halfway and paused. Then, he inserted himself again all the way

to the base and gyrated slowly.

Kisaragi felt his body grow hotter as his gaze remained glued to the movement of the thick shaft inside him. His back arched.

Their sweat mingled together and it was wet and slippery where their bodies joined, but Kisaragi did not feel any repulsion.

“I didn’t think you’d get so into it,” Kanesaki teased. Kisaragi turned his face away huffily.

“Only because I’ve gone without for so long.”

“If that’s the excuse you want to make,” Kanesaki laughed as he tousled Kisaragi’s hair with a rough hand. “You’re cute, doctor.”

Kisaragi looked up at the man, feeling the shaft within him grow in size.

“You’re making me want to go for a second round. And we are. No buts.”

By the time Kanesaki was satisfied enough to detach himself, Kisaragi could barely keep his eyes open.

“Stay the night,” Kanesaki said as he wiped Kisaragi’s lower regions with his bathrobe. Kisaragi nodded silently and fell into a slumber.

He awoke in the middle of the night to see the moonlight streaming through the large window. The room was bathed in silver light, and Kisaragi’s eyes fell on the figure in the middle of the room.

Kanesaki was sitting in an armchair and cradling his head in his hands.

When Kisaragi squinted, he could see the man's shoulders jerk irregularly. Once in a while, a low growl escaped his lips.

The man was crying.

Kisaragi had heard that people from that country wept loudly - that they expressed their sadness through the volume of their voices. He had read somewhere that that was why people hired "weeping women" to cry at funerals.

But the man wept silently.

Kisaragi closed his eyes. He knew that the man's sadness was something he would never be able to understand.

[unaju*](#) Grilled eel served on a bed of rice.

Chapter 11

After that, Kanesaki continued to travel to Niigata Prefecture at least once a week. On one occasion, he brought back crab. On another, he brought back Botan shrimp. Once, he had bought a Russian matrosyha doll — a doll with several smaller dolls nested inside.

“We usually pack drugs in here to bring them back,” he had said, and this time Kisaragi had thrown the doll back at him exasperation.

“I was just kidding, doctor. I won’t use you like that.”

Those kinds of interactions had become a part of Kisaragi’s daily life by then, when he met with Hasunuma one day at the end of November. Kanesaki had made an unusual suggestion to meet up in the hotel lobby this time for their usual appointment — the lobby of a luxury hotel that was fast-becoming a famous location in Roppongi.

Kisaragi was sitting in the coffee lounge, looking at his iPad while waiting for his coffee to arrive. He felt the atmosphere around him suddenly change. He looked up see two men in black suits, sporting stereotypical *yakuza*-style perms. They glared menacingly at the people around them as they approached. One man had a large cut on his cheek. They were Kanesaki’s subordinates.

Although Kisaragi was already familiar with their faces, they did indeed sorely stand out in the hotel lounge. He could understand why the prim and proper people around him would stiffen in astonishment.

“Doctor!” said the men loudly as they spotted Kisaragi’s face. They

stomped noisily over and bowed deeply. “We’re sorry. The boss is going to be a little late. Something bad’s come up, but he says it’ll be cleaned up soon.”

“Sure. I’ll wait.”

The men went out the same way they had come in, throwing piercing glares at those around them. Kisaragi felt the eyes of the patrons gather on him, and hastily looked down at his iPad.

My goodness... they can’t act like they’re in Kabukicho.

“Kisaragi.”

He heard a familiar voice call his name, and for a moment Kisaragi forgot where he was. He looked up to see Hasunuma standing in front of him with a perplexed look. Kisaragi felt his heart beat faster. He swallowed hard.

Oh... will you look at me. He was still in love with Hasunuma. *Not that it would make a difference,* Kisaragi thought as he purposefully arranged his face to look cheerful.

“Hey,” he said raising his hand. “Hasunuma, what a coincidence! What brings you here?”

Hasunuma glanced in the direction that the men had gone. “Who were those guys? Your friends?”

“No, not friends. Acquaintances of an acquaintance, you might say.”

Hasunuma sat down in the open seat next to Kisaragi’s.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I’m pretty sure all of the other customers in this lounge heard it, too. Look at the way they were talking to you! They almost sounded like yakuza. Don’t tell me you’re associating with the wrong kind of people.”

Hasunuma's face was serious, and Kisaragi was starting to feel pained.
"It's nothing. There's nothing for you to be worried about."

"If you say so." Hasunuma reached for Kisaragi's knee and gave it a firm clap. "You've got yourself together and you're smart. I trust you won't make any mistakes."

Kisaragi averted his eyes, barely able to restrain the heated feelings that threatened to spill over. *Hasunuma, I haven't got myself together at all.*

Suddenly a deep voice spoke from above.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, doctor."

The two of them looked up at the same time to see two men in black suits staring down at them.

"Let's go, doctor. I've reserved us a suite in this hotel. Let's hurry up and get down and dirty, shall we?"

Kisaragi felt his cheeks burn. "Mr. Kanesaki!" he hissed unwittingly. Kanesaki grabbed his arm roughly and made him stand up, deftly scooping up the iPad that had slid out of Kisaragi's hands.

"Let's get going. A good day to you, sir," he said to Hasunuma. Hasunuma, who had been staring in astonishment, came to his senses and bolted up.

"Kisaragi!" he exclaimed.

Kisaragi did not want to be the target of attention any longer.

"I'm sorry. Excuse us," he said shortly, brushing Kanesaki's hand away.
"Mr. Kanesaki, please stop."

"As you wish, princess." Kanesaki's tone was light, but his smile did not

reach his eyes. As they walked side by side, he opened his mouth again. “Was that him?” he muttered.

“What are you talking about?”

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter.”

Kanesaki had been telling the truth when he said he had reserved a room. The suite was on the topmost floor of the hotel. Once they stepped inside, Kanesaki popped the cork on the welcome champagne left on the table.

“Have a drink.”

Kisaragi remained silent as he drank. Kanesaki drank with him, also silent. On their way out of the lounge, Kisaragi had thrown a glance over his shoulder. Hasunuma was in the midst of returning to his own table, and a young woman had been seated there. She was wearing a cream-colored suit. Her long hair, parted down the middle, was glossy.

Kisaragi was certain that it was Hasunuma’s fiancé.

“That should be enough,” Kanesaki said once they had emptied the champagne bottle, and invited Kisaragi to the bedroom. As always, once Kanesaki climbed on top of him, he launched into conversation about the negotiation he had been having earlier, and TV dramas that he had been hooked onto lately. He spoke not a single word about Hasunuma.

Kisaragi felt as if the man had seen right through him, and felt himself choke up.

Once they had relieved themselves of their pent-up desires a few times, Kanesaki finally disentangled himself from Kisaragi. He ruffled the man’s head.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?” Kisaragi’s voice shook in spite of himself, and he turned his back to the other man.

“Why aren’t I saying anything? You’re the one who’s clammed up, doctor. I’ve been blabbering nonstop.” The man’s hand continued to stroke Kisaragi’s head as if to soothe a small boy. “Doctor, let me tell you something. There are some things you can’t have, no matter how hard you try. And there isn’t anything you can do about it. But if you want it and you can’t help it, there’s nothing I can do.”

The man’s voice was gentle and carried no hint of reproach. Kisaragi felt the man’s warmth against his trembling back, and desperately tried to hold back the sobs that were about to burst out of him.

He suddenly knew why he was so drawn to this man.

He’s the same. He’s....

The image of the man crying in the middle of the night rose in his mind. Kisaragi turned back to face the man and twined his arms around his neck.

“Doctor?”

“Take me again.”

The man’s large hand stroked his back, and Kisaragi heard the sound of his own throat rumble.

Once December rolled around, Kanasaki suddenly called Kisaragi out and invited him to go away.

“Where?”

“Well... two men together would probably stand out, so... Karuizawa would be good. I have a summer house there.” He went on to explain that it was a summer house that a certain financing company had repossessed from a

debtor.

“Let’s go this weekend,” he suggested.

Kisaragi had no plans, and no reason to refuse.

On Saturday afternoon, Kanesaki was the one in the driver’s seat as they headed to Karuizawa in his white Mercedes. The Mercedes stopped in front of a house that was in an area of Old Karuizawa where there were many luxury villas. The property was vast, and the house itself was a stately Western-style mansion with a towering chimney.

The oak trees and white birches had all shed their leaves. There were no signs of people, and it was quiet all around. The wine cellar in the basement and the refrigerator in the kitchen were bursting.

“Looks like we won’t have to go out to eat,” Kanesaki said contentedly as he looked through them.

“What?” Kisaragi exclaimed. “I can’t cook, you know.”

“I will. I may not look like a chef, but I do have a chef’s license.”

Kisaragi looked at him skeptically.

“If that’s what you want to think,” said Kanesaki, laughing loudly.

Nevertheless, when it came time to serve dinner, Kanesaki presented him with a full course of steak done rare, Italian salad, and French onion soup. After dinner, they started a fire in the fireplace and enjoyed wine and cheese. Then, they rid themselves of their clothes until they were as naked as when they were first born, and made love on the Persian rug in front of the fireplace.

As always, Kanesaki talked nonstop. But that night, he talked about his days in his homeland. He rolled Kisaragi’s nipple with his finger as he spoke.

“It was 1953 when the war ended,” he said. He sucked on the nipple for a while, then his lips drew away. “But I was born after that, so I don’t know anything about it.” He pinched the nipple between his fingers.

The battle drew to a close, and the nation was divided. Torn asunder. Even then, the turmoil continued, and many people went missing. *My father was one of them.*

They called people who had been abducted to the North the *nabbugja* — the abductees. But the nation did not admit it. They called the missing *wolbukja* — people who had gone willingly to the north. The family of the *wolbukja* who were left behind were discriminated against and seen as traitors.

I was still a newborn. My mother took me and my older brother around to various relatives, where we managed to feed ourselves. But supporting the family of a *wolbukja* meant being called a traitor as well.

We had no place to belong.

I was twelve when my older brother disappeared. I heard later on that my brother had been in contact with a spy from the North. It was to gain information about my father.

I don’t know if my brother went to the North on his own will, or because he had been tricked by the spy. There’s no way to know now.

I was caught by the authorities, the public safety organization, as you’d call it here — and tortured. They burned the soles of my feet, and stabbed knives into both of my palms. They pressed a hot brand to my ribs.

How does a twelve-year-old know any better? I don’t even remember whose name I gave. But I heard later that brother’s friends from university had been hauled in. They took advantage of a kid to ensnare people who were

arguing for democratization.

I was released. I was a broken mess when I came home. I was greeted with the cold stares of my neighbors.

Traitor, they all said. They said my father, my brother, and even his younger brother — me — had been agents for the North. They threw rocks at my mother and I.

After that, my brother's friends from his university came and beat me up. They said their comrades had been hauled in because of me. They told them I had to help overthrow the current government to make up for it.

I'd had enough of it. The North. The South. All of it. I left my mother and headed for Japan.

Kanesaki spoke of such things between their acts. Eventually, he released the last of his sperm and rolled over on his back. Kisaragi took Kanesaki's hand and pressed his lips against his scars.

"Doctor?"

"Shh."

He kissed his ribs next, then the soles of his feet.

"These are your stigmata." Five hideous sores. Kisaragi shed tears at the idea of a twelve-year-old boy enduring these.

"Are you crying for me?"

Kisaragi latched onto the man's lips, this time of his own will.

The two of them spent the two days cooped up in the summer house, deeply immersed in the act of arousing each other.

“No more,” Kisaragi would say, but he would find his strength returning after a time. He felt more exasperated than impressed.

“I don’t know how it can get hard after all of this.”

Kanesaki who had burrowed between Kisaragi’s legs was[m1] fondling him with his tongue as he laughed.

“It’s because I’m that good, doctor.” He then straddled Kisaragi’s face and thrust his manhood in his face. “Will you get it up for me, doctor?”

Kisaragi did not resist as he took the man in his mouth, savored it, and caressed it. They released themselves into each other’s mouths over and over.

They did not return to Tokyo until past midnight, when the new week had already begun. Kanesaki pulled up to the curb of Kisaragi’s condo in his Mercedes.

“See ya,” he said. He then took a key case out of his suit pocket and tossed it to him. “You dropped this in the car.”

Kisaragi thought nothing of it as he took it and climbed out.

Chapter 12

On Monday morning Kisaragi made his way on foot toward the Crest Hotel and the clinic inside. He drew closer to find a swarm of police cars in front of T. Medical School next door.

Kisaragi had not looked at the paper or watched the news this morning; he had come home in the wee light of the morning, caught what sleep he could, and come straight to work. He wondered what it could be.

“What’s going on?” he asked the clinic receptionist.

“It happened early in the morning, so I don’t think it was in the papers. You don’t know about it, doctor?”

“What is it? An accident?”

“No, it’s...” The receptionist turned on the TV in the lobby.

“This is the National Police Agency Press Club reporting,” said the tense voice of a newscaster.

“There’s been a murder at your university, doctor,” said the receptionist. “A patient charged to the special room was shot with a pistol! Apparently he was a yakuza boss.”

“What?” Kisaragi felt a chill down his spine as he remained glued to the TV to listen to the news.

“Access to the special room is difficult and restricted. For this reason, the

National Police Agency suspects that there may have been collaboration with an insider. Currently they are in the process of conducting thorough interviews with the individuals involved.”

Kisaragi put a hand to his chest, where his inner chest pocket was located. He remembered the key case that Kanesaki had tossed to him. He dashed to the director’s office and pulled out the white lab coat from his locker. His nameplate was gone. Kisaragi felt his entire body go cold as he realized his dreaded prediction had been right.

Just then, the phone on his desk rang.

“Doctor, a call for you on line one.”

A low voice was on the other end.

“Doctor, I didn’t mean to lie to you. Your nameplate and magnetic card are going to arrive by courier soon. The guy who did it is a hitman with a good reputation, so he hasn’t left evidence behind. Keep your mouth shut, and no one will know. You also have an alibi. We’ve made sure that there are no records of entry or exit. Tomorrow, one of the lower-ranking guys is set to turn himself in.”

“How could you?” The glaring fact was still there - he had assisted in a horrendous murder. Kisaragi’s legs shook and fury brewed within him.

“Why?” he asked. It was the only thing he could say.

“Money. Besides, the guy who got killed and the guy who killed him are both worthless, anyway. Nothing to worry about.”

“And so are you.”

He could sense the other man’s breath catch on the other end. After a short silence, soft laughter reached his ear.

“Sounds just like something you would say. See ya, doctor. We’ll never meet again.” The man gave a one-sided farewell and hung up.

Kisaragi put the phone back in its cradle and looked up at the ceiling. He was not going to back down yet. He pushed the intercom resolutely.

“It’s me. Kisaragi.”

Arima gave him directions to a Japanese-style restaurant in Akasaka. When Kisaragi arrived, Arima was wearing a loose-fitting *kimono* and sleeveless *haori* vest, having drinks with the proprietress. When he saw Kisaragi come in, he had her leave so that the two of them to be left alone.

“What is it, doctor?”

“Were you behind all of this?” Kisaragi asked as he remained standing, glaring at the man. He figured it must have been from day one, when Arima suddenly wanted to be admitted to the hospital.

“No. Well, have a seat first, will you?” Arima poured himself a glass of *sake* and took a draught. “Like I said, Kanesaki doesn’t live in the same world as you do.”

“Please answer my question.”

Arima shrugged. “The guy who got murdered was the head of the Ichi-kai. I was asked by a certain politician. The guy who got erased was going to co-operate with the district public prosecutor’s office. But the fact that he was staying in the special room was also leaked from the prosecutor’s office. That’s what this country’s like.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

Arima took a sip from his glass again. “It’s true that I was asked about it. I know a lot about the floor where the special room is located, after all.”

“So you had Kanesaki investigate inside?”

Arima shook his head. “That was a coincidence. Just like how introducing Kanesaki to you was a coincidence. And I couldn’t have imagined that you and Kanesaki would end up like this, either. But,” he continued, “Kanesaki is the one who volunteered. He said he could get his hands on a magnetic entrance card.”

Kisaragi bit his lip. Had Kanesaki been so gentle in Karuizawa because his conscience was eating at him? Kisaragi kept his eyes on the ground. Arima cleared his throat awkwardly and opened his mouth.

“Just so you know... that summer house belongs to me, doctor.”

Kisaragi snapped his head up and flushed.

“I know this won’t mean anything to you now, but Kanesaki didn’t want to hurt you. He could have hired a bunch of roughnecks and taken the card from you by force.”

But instead, he had distanced Kisaragi from the clinic and had someone break in in his absence.

“Cut him some slack. Think of how he must’ve felt.” Arima reached out and clapped Kisaragi on the knee.

“— Why did Kanesaki volunteer himself?”

“Kanesaki needed a large sum of money. There was a guy who would pay up, and a guy who would carry it out. He just fixed it for them.”

“Why did he need so much money?”

Arima blinked his beady eyes. “Because he wants to go to the North.”

Kisaragi’s breath caught in his throat. *He said he’d abandoned his country.* But he also remembered the man crying silently. And the words he had said as he caressed Kisaragi after he had met with Hasunuma. *There are some things you can’t have, but you still can’t help wanting it.*

What had happened?

Kisaragi gathered himself and straightened up.

“Mr. Arima, I have a favor to ask.”

“And what would that be?”

“Please get me in touch with Kanesaki.”

Arima placed his glass back down on the table. “I always wished I could see you want something.” He stared steadily at Kisaragi. “But I didn’t expect it to be Kanesaki.”

He then clapped his hands loudly.

“You saved my life. There’s no way I won’t turn down your favor.”

When his secretary came in, Arima gave an order.

“Take the doctor to Kanesaki,” he said. He then returned his gaze to Kisaragi. “You sit tight at home. Kanesaki is hiding out. It’ll take some time.”

Chapter 13

It was snowing in Niigata.

Kisaragi remained blindfolded as he switched cars three times along the way from Tokyo. He was ultimately taken to a warehouse on the Port of Niigata.

He was taken to a basement room. Under the dim lights, he could see blankets laid between cardboard, and Kanesaki listening to the radio.

“Why did you come?” said the man, standing up when he saw Kisaragi. Kisaragi embraced the man without saying anything. Bewilderment crossed Kanesaki’s face, as well as that of the man who had brought him here.

“I didn’t know you could be so passionate, doctor.”

Despite his words, Kanesaki was equally quick to act, not even waiting for the guide to leave the room before pushing Kisaragi down on the floor. His hands frantically sought physical contact, his breathing already heavy. Kisaragi’s back ached being pressed down on the thin blanket barely cushioning the hard concrete underneath. But he didn’t care as he moved vigorously on his own.

They caught each other’s breaths and devoured each other’s flesh. Before Kisaragi knew it, he was moaning.

Kanesaki did not speak a word as he continued to push Kisaragi toward the edge. Even after the man had released himself, Kanesaki changed positions and started again.

Eventually, he climbed off of Kisaragi’s limp body and snatched a bottled

drink that was close by.

“Drink it,” he said.

When the moisture had finally returned to Kisaragi’s parched throat, he spoke.

“Why?”

“Well... it would be a long story.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Kisaragi took another gulp before looking up at Kanesaki, who had been providing his arm as a pillow. “Why didn’t you say anything when we were... you know... doing it? You always talk through the whole thing.”

Kanesaki threw his head back as he laughed.

“Oh, that’s what you meant. To tell you the truth, I always used to talk to hold myself off longer before I[m1] came. I wanted to see you enjoying it for as long as I could.”

He caught Kisaragi’s chin with his stout fingers. “I just couldn’t hold myself back today to do that.” Their lips touched as they devoured each other’s tongues. Kanesaki overlapped his body over Kisaragi’s again.

“Do you have to go?” Kisaragi said breathlessly as he was penetrated again. “Why...?”

Kanesaki gently stroked Kisaragi’s belly with the palm of his hand.

“Aren’t you angry that I used you?”

Kisaragi shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.” The only interest he had was for the man in front of him. Once they had spent all of their bodily fluids, the man took Kisaragi into his arms.

“I thought I’d abandoned that country. But half of my heart still seems to be over there.” He wanted to know the whereabouts of his father and brother. That was why he had come to Japan to make money: money gave him limitless power. He could buy information with money.

At the very least, he wanted to know if they were alive or dead. He used Arima’s connections with Russia to stretch feelers into the North.

He was told that his father and brother were alive, and he continued to send money. He even lent a hand to illegal money transfers. He had been told that his family would be able to survive as long as he continued to send money.

But it had been a lie.

“I sneaked into the North from Russia on my last trip. That’s when I learned the truth.”

His father had died shortly after being abducted. His older brother had been manipulated by false information and been put into a concentration camp.

“I was essentially helping support their system.”

“And why did you go up North...?”

Kanesaki stroked Kisaragi’s head. “I at least wanted to see where they’d died. There was an underground organization. I decided to help. That way, my home country could be unified as one.”

Kisaragi felt himself choke up and buried his face in the man’s chest. “Is there anything I can do?”

Kanesaki hooked a finger underneath Kisaragi’s chin and made him look up. “I’ll be leaving half of my heart here. So keep it for me.”

“Until you come back?”

“Until I come back.”

“You’re lying.”

Kanesaki wiped the edge of Kisaragi’s eye. “If that’s what you think.”

They did not exchange any other words. The two sought each other until the very last moment. Kisaragi came close to losing consciousness from the intoxication and pain. He felt like they were two animals eating each other alive.

Three days later, the ship arrived to take the man away. The man left the shores, bound for the land on the other side of the sea.

Chapter 14

After parting with the man in Niigata, Kisaragi returned to work.

After a while, he realized that he could not sleep, but it was convenient for getting his accumulated work out of the way. He could no longer eat, but it was no inconvenience to him. He no longer had the desire to eat because he could not taste anything, anyway.

As the end of the year grew near, both the outpatient ward and inpatient wings overflowed with patients. Kisaragi offered to cover shifts for colleagues who had developed high fevers from the flu. He began working even more than before.

A week into the New Year, when New Year pine decorations were put away and the bustle of the year-end and beginning had died down, Kisaragi collapsed in the middle of his shift.

One day, when Kisaragi was receiving an infusion, Associate Professor Matsuyama, who was the attending physician of Kisaragi, knocked and came in.

“Kisaragi, I’ve consulted the psychiatric department,” he informed him.

“What are you talking about?” Kisaragi sat up in bed. The associate professor hastily left the room. In his stead came Nakazaki, a lecturer of the psychiatric department who was in the same cohort as Hasunuma and also was

on friendly terms with him.

“Kisaragi, the professor asked me himself.” There was nothing Kisaragi could say if that was the case. He reluctantly submitted himself to Nakazaki’s questions. Nakazaki had even scrutinized Kisaragi’s nurse’s records.

“Your nurse’s records say you’re reading books at three in the morning.”

“So? I always do. Even at home.”

“It’s called early morning awakening. At least in our field.” Early morning awakening was characteristic of depression, and Kisaragi was also aware of this fact.

“Please don’t tell me you’re implying I have depression.”

“That’s exactly it.”

“How? I’m working diligently, and I have motivation. It’s true that I can’t sleep, but it’s not a problem, is it? I don’t get sleepy during the day, either.”

Nakazaki frowned. “That’s called being manic defensive,” he said. “Your manic state is aggravated because you don’t want to admit that you’re in a depressive one.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Kisaragi.

“That’s exactly a sign of illness,” the man shot back. “You aren’t acknowledging it. Typical.” Nakazaki drew away from his bedside and lapsed into thought. “The professor has been telling me the same thing. Let’s file for worker’s compensation. You need to take a break.”

“A break?”

Nakazaki turned back to face him and smiled. “Knowing your personality, you’d probably still read or do research at home. Let’s see... you need to go away

somewhere to rest.”

He then stared into Kisaragi’s eyes.

“To tell you the truth, I called him right away when I heard you’d been admitted to the hospital. He was really worried.” Even Kisaragi could tell that the man was talking about Hasunuma.

“Get admitted to his place. It’s a perfect opportunity.”

Kisaragi bit his lip and shook his head. “No. I don’t want to be a burden to him.”

“What are you talking about? You’re best friends.”

If he refused too vehemently, it might be seen as suspicious. Kisaragi finally reluctantly nodded in assent.

“Don’t tell me you’re just starting to pack?” he heard a familiar voice say. Kisaragi paused from packing his bags to be discharged and turned around to see Hasunuma.

“I came to pick you up because I couldn’t wait,” Hasunuma said cheerfully as he approached the bed and began to fold the clothes that were laid out upon it. “Or, more like, to make sure you wouldn’t run away.”

Hasunuma closed the suitcase, picked it up, and started walking away with it. He stopped at the doorway and turned around.

“Hurry up.” He had said the phrase many times to Kisaragi like this during university, when Kisaragi had dawdled in getting ready. This time, he was looking straight at him, face to face. There was no hesitation in his gaze, and Kisaragi

found himself unable to break their eye contact.

“But...” he said under his breath.

“It’s alright. Just leave it to me.”

The hospital was located in a comfortable region of Sotobo, where the climate was mild. Kisaragi felt both physically and emotionally at ease when Hasunuma was by his side. His mental and physical strength, which had been sapped until now, gradually recovered.

Hasunuma’s hospital was sprawling. It not only had an inpatient facility but a newly-built work centre for outpatients who came for regular sessions. There was also a group home onsite, where patients lived together and helped each other out.

One day, Hasunuma took Kisaragi on a tour of the facilities. They strolled through the vast property as if on a leisurely walk. The place appeared to be under expansion. Small trucks trundled to and fro, and a portion of the bamboo wood was being cleared. A number of men were busy bundling the bamboo stalks that had been cut down.

“Are you increasing the number of beds?” Kisaragi asked.

“Nope,” said Hasunuma, shaking his head. “We’re building a work centre.”

Closer inspection revealed a pile of logs where the bamboo wood used to be. The building, when complete, would be a log house. Patients would attend on a regular schedule to help build it.

“Work centre? So you’re expanding it?”

“You could say we are. It’s a work centre for people with intellectual disabilities, as well as for people who are mentally ill. Actually,” Hasunuma

admitted, “my older brother is one of them. There were some complications when my mother gave birth to him, and he was left with a brain disorder.”

Kisaragi had never heard this story before, and looked up at Hasunuma’s face. Hasunuma was wearing his usual calm smile.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Kisaragi asked.

“It was a personal thing.”

Kisaragi had always thought that the man’s life was full of light and happiness. He now felt regret at his shallow assumptions.

“I guess I didn’t know anything about you,” he said.

“Neither did I. I wasn’t able to understand you in the true sense. Not until it was too late — until you were sick.” Hasunuma laid a gentle hand on Kisaragi’s shoulder.

“I think people have a right to live where they want to live. Society might think that the handicapped are more comfortable living in a facility where people will take care of them, but... that’s not true. Everyone wants to live as a part of society. People have the right to live where they want, with whom they want.”

Kisaragi thought of the nation that had been divided into the North and South. He prayed that the man’s homeland would one day become one, and that people would be able to live freely where they pleased.

The work center that was already established contained a bakery. The facility was designed like a sun room to let in lots of natural sunlight. Regular psychiatric outpatients kneaded dough along with the intellectually-disabled.

“Eat this, doctor,” said a young man with Down syndrome, offering Kisaragi a freshly-baked melon bun. The bun, which was colored a faint green in the likeness of a melon, was soft and sweet.

“Is it good? Is it good?” The young man asked eagerly, wearing an innocent smile as he looked up at Kisaragi.

“Yes,” he Kisaragi said. “It’s so delicious, it’s making me cry.”

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One spring day, Kisaragi[m1] stepped out onto the balcony adjacent to his room. The man’s emaciated body had begun to flesh out again. He was now able to sleep better at night.

As Kisaragi gazed at the expanse of ocean before him, tears sprung to his eyes and beads of light danced in his vision. A serene spring ocean spread before him. The waves were calm, unusual for the ocean on the coast of Sotobo.

Kisaragi was standing on the balcony of the hospital. He recalled the face of the man who had crossed the ocean. He felt as if half of his heart has disappeared since that day. He thought of the man who lived in the sundered country. As a Japanese, he would never be able to understand the man’s profound sadness.

But now, with his torn heart, he felt like he had gotten at least a little bit closer to the man. It was all his assumption. He knew that.

“If that’s what you want to think,” the man might say if he were here. Kisaragi’s vision blurred and the ocean glittered before his eyes.

“Hey,” Hasunuma said when he came up. “We have a shortage of doctors who practice internal medicine. We’ve got more beds now, and we have a lot of patients with drug addictions. Some patients are also suffering gastrointestinal disorders in combination. I was wondering if you would help me out.”

“Well...” Kisaragi gazed out at the ocean. “I guess since you’re getting married, you wouldn’t be able to devote all of your time to the hospital anymore.”

Hasunuma scratched his head sheepishly. “Actually, that fell through,” he said.

“What? Why?”

“Well, I had a lot of things to consider.”

Kisaragi remembered the man mention his older brother who was disabled.

“You said it was arranged through a matchmaker, but... was it for that kind of reason?”

“No,” Hasunuma said firmly. “I called it off. There’s someone else in my life that I need more. Stupid, aren’t I?” he said quietly with an ironic smile. “For me to... realize how important someone is to me after he’s been taken by another man.”

He finished and peered into Kisaragi’s face, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“I might be too late, but... please. Will you be with me?”

Kisaragi stared at the man in front of him, unable to take his words at face value.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I—I mean, it doesn’t get any more obvious, does it? If it were a man and a woman, it’d be a marriage proposal.”

Kisaragi shook his head in disbelief. “Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not being stupid. I’m serious.”

Kisaragi still shook his head. “Are you saying you can sleep with me? Can you feel desire for a man? Don’t force yourself. For me, being friends with you is good enough.”

He hesitated.

“If we can’t stay as friends, I feel like I’d end up hating you. That’s the last thing I want to do.”

Hasunuma strengthened the grip on his shoulder. “I’m not sure if I can, but... I’ll try my best.”

They made love on the hospital bed. At first, Hasunuma was hesitant and had some trouble getting erect. After Kisaragi caressed him with his hands and his mouth, Hasunuma’s member gradually grew hard enough for them to have intercourse.

“I’m surprised. Hmm...” Hasunuma muttered to himself as he and Kisaragi joined themselves together. Once inside, Hasunuma was passionate, and both of them reached their climax. Hasunuma remained inside Kisaragi as he gently caressed the man.

“I should have tried it sooner. That way, I wouldn’t have had to make you suffer like this. I’m sorry,” he apologized as he kissed the man.

“I have something I need to tell you,” Kisaragi said hesitantly as they broke apart from their kiss. “I love you, but... I can’t do this.”

“Are you talking about that guy? Kanasaki?”

Kisaragi looked up at him in surprise. The man was smiling.

“He’s the man that made you sick. Of course I would know about him.”

Hasunuma gently ran his fingers through Kisaragi's hair. "He was that man I met at the hotel, right? I was worried about you, so I took a picture of him on my phone in secret. When I heard you'd gotten sick, I went to see Arima."

Kisaragi's eyes widened at Arima's name. "How...?"

"Everyone in the hospital knew that you were the doctor in charge of Arima. I couldn't think of any other person who had ties to the *yakuza*. So I showed him the photo and asked about him."

Hasunuma's tone was casual, but Kisaragi could imagine how much trouble he had gone through to seek this information. Arima was not a person you could meet easily.

"You put yourself in danger for me, all just to... but why...?"

"Idiot," Hasunuma said with a smile. "Because I wanted to know more about you. Tell me more about what kind of person Kanesaki was."

"Then I'm sure you already know," Kisaragi said. "Half of my heart already belongs to him."

"That's fine," Hasunuma said. "The other half belongs to me."

He reached out and gently stroked Kisaragi's hair. "When Kanesaki comes back, we'll have a duel, and the winner will get to have you." He gave a cheerful laugh. "And let me tell you, I'll definitely win."

That moment, Kisaragi made a resolution.

He would do what he can while he waited for the man's return.

"I'll be with you. Until Kanesaki comes back."

Hasunuma smiled at his answer. "If that's what you want to do."

The man's soft voice echoed in his heart. Kisaragi felt a warm droplet roll down

his cheek.